

We claim:

1 1. A method for use by a service provider to facilitate communication between
2 customers of the service provider, the method comprising the steps of:
3 receiving a request from a customer to establish communication with another
4 customer;
5 confirming the identity of each customer;
6 transmitting to each customer executable code enabling encrypted
7 communication therewith;
8 obtaining from each customer information regarding the customer's computing
9 environment;
10 preparing a set of applications for use by each customer, in accordance with
11 said information and said request;
12 transmitting the set of applications as executable code to each customer;
13 establishing a communication path to each customer; and
14 specifying the communication path to the customers, thereby permitting the
15 customers to communicate over said path using said applications.

1 2. The method of claim 1 wherein said confirming, transmitting and obtaining
2 steps are performed via the Internet, and said establishing step comprises
3 obtaining connectivity services via the Internet for use by the customers; and
4 altering the communication path in accordance with customer requirements.

1 3. The method of claim 2 wherein the connectivity services are obtained by
2 contacting a vendor of said services via the Internet.

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1 4. The method of claim 1 wherein the communication path is established for a
2 limited time period.

1 5. The method of claim 1 wherein said preparing step comprises obtaining at
2 least one of the applications via the Internet.

1 6. The method of claim 1 wherein said method is performed using an edge-
2 of-network server.

1 7. The method of claim 6 wherein said preparing step comprises obtaining at
2 least one of the applications from a storage device connected to the server.

1 8. The method of claim 2 wherein the specified communication path is
2 established on the Internet and communications using the path are encrypted, so that the
3 customers participate in a secure virtual trading zone.

1 9. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of monitoring the
2 communication path.

1 10. The method of claim 1 wherein said obtaining step is performed using an
2 applet resident at the customer.

1 22. A computer program product comprising instructions for performing a method
2 to facilitate communication between customers of a service provider, the method
3 comprising the steps of:

4 receiving a request from a customer to establish communication with another
5 customer;

6 confirming the identity of each customer;

7 transmitting to each customer executable code enabling encrypted
8 communication therewith;

9 obtaining from each customer information regarding the customer's computing
10 environment;

11 preparing a set of applications for use by each customer, in accordance with
12 said information and said request;

13 transmitting the set of applications as executable code to each customer;

14 establishing a communication path to each customer; and

15 specifying the communication path to the customers, thereby permitting the
16 customers to communicate over said path using said applications.

1 23. The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said confirming,
2 transmitting

3 and obtaining steps are performed via the Internet, and said establishing step comprises

4 obtaining connectivity services via the Internet for use by the customers; and

5 altering the communication path in accordance with customer requirements.

1 24. The computer program product of claim 23 wherein the connectivity services are
2 obtained by contacting a vendor of said services via the Internet.

